

## THE CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

- 5                   1.       A tropicalizing agent comprising:  
a liquid fat component;  
a plurality of gel beads which comprise:  
a sugar or polyol, or both, in an amount of about 20 to 50 weight  
percent of the gel beads;  
10                   an emulsifier component to facilitate uniform gel bead size  
distribution; and  
the remainder being water present in an amount sufficient to ensure  
that the sugar or polyol is present in aqueous form,  
wherein the emulsifier component is present in an amount sufficient so the gel  
15 beads form a water-in-oil emulsion with the liquid fat component, wherein the liquid fat  
component is present in an amount sufficient to disperse the gel beads therein and wherein a  
majority of the gel beads remain substantially intact to trap the aqueous form therein for at  
least about 8 hours after being cooled below about 40°C.
- 20                   2.       The agent of claim 1, wherein the gel beads further comprise a gelling  
component in an amount sufficient to facilitate gelling of the gel beads.
- 25                   3.       The agent of claim 2, wherein the gelling component is present in an  
amount of about 0.2 to 1.2 weight percent of the gel beads and comprises at least two of  
kappa-carrageenan, iota-carrageenan, locust bean gum, agar, alginate, milk proteins, or  
gelatin.
- 30                   4.       The agent of claim 1, wherein at least a majority of the gel beads  
remain substantially intact for at least about 4 hours after being cooled below about 30°C, and  
the tropicalizing agent contains about 20 to 60 weight percent water.
5.       The agent of claim 1, wherein the gel beads are at least substantially  
spherical.

6. The agent of claim 1, wherein the gel beads have a volume average size of about 20 to 80 microns.

7. The agent of claim 1, wherein the liquid fat component comprises one or more cocoa butter substitutes.

8. A chocolate or analogue thereof comprising the tropicalizing agent of claim 1 in an amount sufficient to increase the structural integrity and shape retention of the chocolate or analogue thereof.

9. A chocolate or analogue thereof comprising the tropicalizing agent of claim 1, wherein the gel beads include sugar crystals present in the form of a plurality of rings or chains each having a size in diameter or length of about 50  $\mu\text{m}$  to 500  $\mu\text{m}$ .

10. A process for preparing a tropicalizing agent which comprises:  
providing a plurality of gel beads comprising one or more sugars or polyols in an amount of about 20 to 50 weight percent of the gel beads, an emulsifier component to facilitate uniform gel bead distribution, and the remainder being water present in an amount sufficient to ensure that the sugar or polyol, or both, is present in aqueous form; and

dispersing the gel beads in a liquid fat component present in an amount sufficient to disperse the gel beads therein,

wherein the emulsifier component is present in an amount sufficient so the gel beads form a water-in-oil emulsion with the liquid fat component, wherein the liquid fat component is present in an amount sufficient to disperse the gel beads therein, and wherein a majority of the gel beads remain substantially intact to trap the aqueous form therein for at least about 8 hours after being cooled below about 40°C.

11. The process of claim 10, wherein the providing further comprises a gelling component that comprises at least two of kappa-carrageenan, iota-carrageenan, locust bean gum, agar, alginate, milk proteins, or gelatin.

12. The process of claim 11, wherein at least substantially all of the gel beads remain intact to trap the aqueous form therein for at least about 8 hours after formation

of the tropicalizing agent and the tropicalizing agent contains about 20 to 60 weight percent water.

13. The process of claim 10, wherein the liquid fat component comprises  
5 one or more cocoa butter substitutes.

14. The process of claim 11, wherein the gelling component is fully dissolved to facilitate dispersal of the gel beads within the liquid fat component.

10 15. A process for tropicalizing chocolate or an analogue thereof, which comprises:

combining a chocolate or chocolate analogue mass with a sufficient amount of tropicalizing agent to form a tropicalized chocolate mass, with the tropicalizing agent comprising (a) a plurality of gel beads comprising water in an amount of about 1 to 2 percent  
15 by weight of the tropicalized chocolate mass, an emulsifier component to facilitate uniform gel bead distribution, and one or more sugars or polyols, or both, in an amount of about 20 to 50 weight percent of the gel beads that forms a syrup with the water that is temporarily retained in the gel beads, and (b) a liquid fat component present in an amount sufficient to ensure the gel beads are dispersed therein; and

20 initiating release of the syrup of water and sugar or polyol, or both, from the gel beads so as to increase the structure of the tropicalized chocolate mass, wherein the amount of tropicalizing agent is sufficient to increase the integrity and shape retention of the tropicalized chocolate mass compared to a non-tropicalized mass.

25 16. The process of claim 15, wherein the combining comprises at least substantially uniformly dispersing the tropicalizing agent in the mass.

17. The process of claim 15, wherein the initiating comprises reducing the temperature of the tropicalized chocolate mass to about -5°C to -15°C.

30 18. The process of claim 15, wherein the chocolate mass is at least partially tempered before combining the tropicalizing agent therewith.

19. The process of claim 15, wherein the gelling component is present and comprises a mixture of at least two of kappa-carrageenan, iota-carrageenan, locust bean gum, agar, alginate, milk proteins, or gelatin.

5 20. The process of claim 15, wherein the gelling component is provided in an amount of less than about 0.5 weight percent of the tropicalized chocolate mass.

21. The process of claim 15, wherein the sugar or polyol comprises sucrose or sorbitol, or a combination thereof.

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22. The process of claim 15, wherein the liquid fat component comprises one or more cocoa butter substitutes.

15 23. The process of claim 15, wherein the liquid fat comprises one or more vegetable fats that are the same as a fat used in preparing the chocolate analogue mass so as to increase the compatibility and stability of the tropicalized chocolate mass.